

Deconstructing Phallogocentrism in Shahrnush Parsipur's *Touba and the Meaning of Night*: A Psycho-Feminist Study

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ABSTRACT

Shahrnush Parsipur (1946) is a celebrated and courageous Iranian novelist. This study deals with her controversial, epic novel *Touba and the Meaning of Night* (1989). The novel is analyzed based on Lacanian theory of subject formation and Cixousian concept of 'écriture féminine'. In this essay a psychoanalytic-feminist discourse is used to intervene between a phallogocentric discourse and a feminist discourse. The pivotal aims of the study are to deconstruct Lacan's concept of phallogocentrism, to redefine the concept of womanhood and to reconstruct feminine identity. According to the French psychoanalyst, Jacques Lacan, it is language that ultimately structures our conscious and unconscious mind and our identity. He introduced a tripartite scheme of psychic development: imaginary, symbolic and real. The symbolic order and its accompanying concept of phallogocentrism is the main focus of this study. By deconstructing symbolic phallus as the transcendental signified which signifies everything including female identity, the researcher's aim is to focus on the need for a female framework and a feminine discourse free from male assumptions in order to reconstruct feminine identity. Helene Cixous, in her essay *The Laugh of Medusa* (1975), introduces a particular kind of female writing and tries to reconstruct the women's shattered, colonized and marginalized identities in order to deconstruct the dominant symbolic order and phallogocentric discourse. The task of this study is to deal with and to follow the trace of masculine ideology and discourse in women's identity in the novel *Touba and the Meaning of Night*. The study also, inspired by Helene Cixous's prophecy of women's experience of writing in a male dominated atmosphere claims that through deconstruction and break down of phallogocentrism, female subjects are constructed and a new discourse for women is established based on which they can reconstruct and forge their new identities.

Keywords: Shahrnush Parsipur; *Touba and the Meaning of Night*; Lacan; Cixous; Phallogocentrism

INTRODUCTION

This study, using Lacan's theory of subject formation and Helen Cixous' ideas, focuses on a novel by Shahrnush Parsipur, a pioneer and preeminent female writer of feminist works. Shahrnush Parsipur is an Iranian novelist, born in Tehran, Iran in 1946.

The novel, *Touba and the Meaning of Night*, published in 1989, narrates the story of "a young girl who comes of age and matures over a period of several decades in Iran's tumultuous nineteenth- and twentieth-century history. Parsipur portrays Touba as a woman coming to consciousness about her own oppression as a woman" (Parsipur, 2008, pp. 364-365). In this novel strong images of women are seen. This epic novel is the story of the lives and experiences of women -specifically of a woman named Touba, her illusive efforts to find truth, and her struggle for survival in a patriarchal society - in 20th century Iran from colonialism era to Islamic Republic. The study of this novel with a psycho-feminist view

point shows that Parsipur transfers her experiences and with her critique of phallogocentric discourse, challenges and questions the holiness and sacredness of that discourse and reflects woman and her identity with a feminine language. This essay tries to show how the role of patriarchy and phallogocentrism in forming the women's identity has been faded out and suppressed in this novel.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

As Jean-Michel Rabate (2003) explains, the French psychoanalyst Jacques Marie Emille Lacan (1901-1981) is the most prominent theoretician of psychoanalysis and a "philosopher of psychoanalysis" after Freud (p. 11), and as Ellie Ragland-Sullivan states Lacan "may well be the most important thinker in France since Rene Descartes and the most innovative and far-ranging thinker in Europe since Friedrich Nietzsche and Sigmund Freud" (p. 9). Lacan's publication of *Ecrits* (1966) brought about his repute. Based on Freud's psychoanalysis and using structuralism and linguistics, Lacan expressed his ideas regarding the unconscious and human subjectivity. Lacan defines the unconscious as the part of the psyche which is structured like language. His tripartite model of human psyche – the imaginary order, the symbolic order and the real order – reflects the subject's psychic development. The imaginary order is the realm of the mother, wishes, fantasies and images, and in this phase the infant is genderless. The imaginary is the order of unity and wholeness between the child and the world around it including its mother. Therefore "imaginary is not fragmented or mediated by difference, by categories, in a word by language and signs" (Habib, 2005, p. 239). The symbolic order is the realm of the father, language, social roles and standards, gender differences and law. Lacan calls the symbolic order "the phallogocentric universe (phallus+logos) in which men are in control of the word" (Guerin et al., 2005, p. 228). In this state male dominated discourse constructs the infant girl as a second-class citizen. Lacan describes the unconscious as the discourse of the Other, "that is, as a systemic social formation, a hoard of words, names, and sentences out of which collective utterances are made" (Rabate, 2003, p. 12).

READING LACAN

"Psychoanalysis treats the subject not as a unique essence but as the product of intersecting psychic, sexual, and linguistic mechanisms" (Culler, 1997, p.109). Lacan's subject is constructed within the symbolic order, "it is our exposure to (and therefore possible foreclosure of) the symbolic order that defines our being". The signifier of this order is the Name of the Father, which is the signifier of the law and locus of the Other. "The Name-of-the-Father, then, is the signifier of the pervasive law structuring human existence." The symbolic father – the center of the universe – separates the child from her/his real being and starts the process of signification. Lacan sees this process of signification as a "discourse in which the subject ..., is spoken rather than speaking". As Heidegger suggests the process of subject formation or "*Seinlassen*, letting-something-be, is fully achieved only through language, "the house of Being" (Smith, 1983, pp. 21-30).

Lacan rejects any notion that the mind of either child or adult has any intrinsic psychical unity; it is merely a "subject" rather than a self or ego, merely the occupant of an always moving position in the networks of signification; hence, for Lacan, even the unconscious is structured like a language. The unconscious is as much a product of signifying systems, and indeed is itself as much a signifying system, as the conscious mind. (Habib, 2005, p.240)

CIXOUS' FEMININE DISCOURSE

French feminist, Helene Cixous (b.1937), using Lacan's concepts, developed her criticism and opposed phallogocentric discourse. She "practices what they call *l'écriture féminine* as a psychically freeing form of feminine discourse"(Guerin et al., 2005, p. 228). Cixous in her manifesto *The Laugh of the Medusa* (1975) brings to birth a kind of writing, *écriture féminine*, which is free from the symbolic, sexual differences, phallus and otherness. In a poetic language Cixous states that a female language and a feminine text is necessary "to smash everything, to shatter the framework of institutions, to blow up the law, to break up the truth with laughter"(cited in Habib, 2005, p. 257). Helene Cixous' ideas regarding language and female sexuality confirms the phallogocentric essence of discourse and language. She puts emphasis on the urgency of breaking out of this imposition and wants women writers to give voice to their bodies. Cixous' theory of *écriture féminine* offers a challenge to the patriarchal symbolic order. She moves from "phallogocentric to the feminine" (Rivkin & Ryan, 2004, p. 261). Cixous focuses on the relations between writing and the body, feminine writing and female body;

It is by writing, from and toward women, and by taking up the challenge of speech which has been governed by the phallus, that women will confirm women in a place other than that which is reserved in and by the symbolic, that is, in a place other than silence. Women should break out of the snare of silence. They shouldn't be conned into accepting a domain which is the margin or the harem. (Cixous, 1976, p. 881)

THE FORMATION OF THE FEMALE SUBJECT IN *TOUBA AND THE MEANING OF NIGHT*

THE SYMBOLIC POWER OF PHALLOGOCENTRISM

Where does the female subject's sense of self come from? Does she have any idea about her identity? Is consciousness and Cartesianism the origin of her individuality? Then what happens to the role of language and culture? But the female subject is not a self aware entity. Marx, Freud and Lacan attack the Cartesian individualism and put emphasis on the importance of social relations, different structures of society and the working of the unconscious mind in constructing the human subject. The female subject is constructed under male centered ideologies and systems. As Lacan says, the infant starts developing her/his sense of self and identity in the mirror stage, through the reflection of her/his image in the mirror, identifying her/him self in the gaze of the m(Other) and losing her/his sense of unity with mother. The law of the father in the symbolic order and the patriarchal discourse which is defined as the center and transcendental signified is transferred to the child by the Other. In other words in the gaze of the Other the subject gains identity. The Other reflects the dominant discourse in the infant's identity and defines her/his world based on its ideologies. In Lacan's view the female identity is constructed through language and in interaction with others during the symbolic order. As he says "language shapes and ultimately structures our unconscious and conscious mind and shapes our self-identity" (Bressler, 2007, p. 153). The Other, language and symbolic order are all under the control of Phallus, that is, male-centered ideologies. "As perception in Lacan depends on being gazed at, so does existence. If what we see is language, then being is being seen in language" (Brivic, 1991, p. 96).

In *Touba and the meaning of Night*, the power symbol is the father, that is to say the society is male centered. The symbolic castration, loss of wholeness and lack of a phallus are at the center of Touba's identity. This feeling of lack brings with it a sense of being inferior in contrast to men. The superiority of the male is clear from the beginning when the writer

equates man with God. Like God that gives meaning to all objects, the Phallus which is the transcendental signified for Lacan, defines everything. The Phallus is the signifier of being, the signifier of male authority and privilege. The subject's real being fades, the pure desire of the time of the Real and Imaginary gives place to the desire of the Other, that is the Other of discourse.

By introducing an awareness of otherness into the structure of the subject, the Phallus subverts not only the illusory symmetry of the imaginary infant/mother dyad but also the possibility of the independent unity of any one term. Identity only means henceforth in relation to responses to and from others.
(Ragland-Sullivan, 1986, p. 176)

We see the dominance of phallus-centered ideologies on Touba's identity. The woman subject in dominant culture is defined by its discourse, that is, by language. The dominant discourse in *Touba and the Meaning of Night* defines the female subject as an outcast. Every aspect of Touba's being and life is formed through language. The dominant discourse has imposed its values on her identity. Touba is an alienated character; she doesn't know who she really is. She is lost. For Touba men are the symbols of spirituality, knowledge, power and truth. She sees herself as a weak, irrational woman and sees the dominant group of men as powerful, rational and knowledgeable. These are assumptions that have been signified to her by the male signifiers through language and discourse, first by her father and then by society. The ruling ideology makes its values central and begins this process from the symbolic order. Then these values become norms and no one can question them. By defining the binary opposition of man and woman they pave the way to keep their position as superior to the inferior women. Man is always the center and woman is the other. Therefore the phallogocentric discourse creates female subjects and defines every atom of their unconscious. So the female subject's subjectivity is not a pre existing consciousness, it is a subjectivity which is the product of discourse and the patriarchal system. Therefore Identity (subjectivity) is not something natural or essential, it is constructed by the dominant discourse based on the concepts of difference and power. Touba is a subject of family, religion, aristocracy, politics. All these ideological institutions and operations are phallogocentric. Within these contexts Touba obtains subjectivity. "The speaking subject is always a split subject, divided between unconscious and conscious motivations, inhabiting both nature and culture since the physiological processes of speaking are derived from the body, but speech itself is also constrained by culture." (qtd. in Talebian, 2014, p.56)

As we said before, in Lacan's words by entering into the world of language and the realm of signifiers our natural and Real being becomes repressed somewhere in our unconscious and later represents itself in the form of lack; then we lose our Imaginary wholeness with our mother through castration and identification with the law of the father, that is, the phallic father. "We are faced with a choice between individuation through psychic castration that is, learning difference by alienation into language, social conventions, and rules – or failure to evolve an identity adequate to social functioning" (Raglan-Sullivan, 1986, p. 273). In this way the meaning becomes signified by the symbolic Phallus and the patriarchal discourse comes to create female subjects and dominate every aspect of women's lives. By the acquisition of discourse and language of the phallic father, the subject's unconscious is formed. Thus the role and position that the subject possesses is not biological. It is in fact a cultural construct of speech. "Every child is under an obligation to submit his or her sexuality to certain restrictions or laws of organization and exchange within a sexually differentiated group and thus finds his or her place within that society" (ibid., p. 268). From the very beginning of Parsipur's novel *Touba and the Meaning of Night*, the dominance of a patriarchal discourse is felt. The society is a male dominated society in which thinking,

knowledge and rationale was considered as men's personal properties and heritage, and women had no access to any of them. The story begins in the last decades of the nineteenth century, during the Qajar dynasty; Touba the main character of the novel is the daughter of Haji Adib a knowledgeable man and an illiterate mother. He was also titled Adib because of his knowledge. Touba knew this from the day she had first been able to distinguish her right hand from her left. Touba's mother, who was an illiterate woman, had often told her and others that their benefactor "is an Adib, and that means a greatly educated person" (Parsipur, p. 3). "Every time he entered the house and announced his arrival by invoking the name of God, the women would run to different corners to cover their hair. Haji enjoyed their imposed silence when he was there" (p.10). In this way man's presence is defined as God's presence, as if he is the God's agent and representative on the earth. "The image of God is a metaphor for 'The-Law-of-the-Father' as in Lacan's prehistoric father, before the mirror stage. Lacan believed that authoritative images like God act as an "incarnation or delight of [the] symbolic" that function to install the child within the scene of subjectivity and discipline him/her: the image 'accelerates the identification of the subject to the symbolic realm' " (Rezaei Hezaveh, Low Abdullah & Yaapar, 2014, p. 6).

Parsipur's description of Haji Adib is illustrative of the male society's biased view in defining womanhood. Haji Adib loves the lady earth because all the features of an ideal lady are gathered in her:

"Haji Adib had believed that the sky was the husband of the earth. Haji loved the **sleeping lady earth**, especially in autumn and winter.[...] In autumn [...] he would go for long walks to hold communication with the clean, quiet, and motionless lady. Without knowing it, he was in love with the earth. He had a feeling of support for her.[...] he imagined himself higher and grander than the lady earth. There could be no doubt that the eternally motionless lady, half asleep and half awake, needed infinite protection". (p. 9)

Finally Haji marries an uneducated woman with characteristics similar to the lady earth: "At the age fifty, when he finally married his illiterate wife, he actually enjoyed her ignorance and simplicity. A simple sharp glance was enough to put the woman in her place, and the turning wheel of life's activity continued" (p. 10). After Haji Adib, Touba's father, came to know that the earth was round, he was shaken of the thought that the "lady earth was never asleep, nor even half asleep. Rather, she was always awake" (p. 10). Indeed he was shaken of the thought that women can think. He kept on believing in the squareness of the earth because he wanted the "thought" to be his sole possession. He thought now that the earth is round and turns, everything on it including, ants, trees, dust, water and even women turn with it and can think: "They think. Unfortunately, they think. Not like the ants nor like the minute parts of the tree, nor like the particles of dust, but more or less as I do" (p. 13). "Throughout history, the female had been prevented from thinking. She was devoid of an individual ego, of an 'I'. Instead, she was a part of 'we', and dissolved into the communal. 'We' drew assistance from collective instinct in order to think" (p. 247). Haji Adib is fearful and angry of the thought that women are capable of thinking:

"As soon as they discover they are able to think, they shall raise dust. The poet Hafez of Shiraz was right, *This witch was the bride of a thousand grooms.* He suddenly realized why the earth had to be square, why it had been considered unmoving, and why every man had the right to build a fence around his land. If they left this prostitute to her own devices, she would constantly spin around and throw everything off balance. Everything would then be chaos". (p. 14)

Because of this he wanted thought to be exclusively for men. Now Haji knows about women's power of thinking and becomes afraid of the day "when the English man would appear and tell his own version of their story" (p. 14). Despite his early prejudice now that he understands that men can no longer keep women as illiterate, motionless and silent creatures, he changes his strategy of signification; just his way of signification changes from signifying silence to signifying whatever is not harmful to his own position as a man. "It was necessary that Haji Adib tell his daughter everything before the English man did. His wife could no longer be educated, but it was not too late for his daughter. Then, even if the English men did tell her their own version, it would have the same effect" (p. 14). So his daughter needs to know in order to protect the patriarchal discourse. Thus Touba began her education, her father signified himself to her, even "her eyes stored the glow of her father's eyes" (p. 15). "...the daughter was the very image of her honorable father" (p. 43). By her father's death her education was interrupted. After her marriage to fifty-two year old Haji Mahmud, her father's nephew, her life continued under the dominance of men's discourse. Haji Mahmud believed that Touba had brought with herself famine and devastation. In his view Touba was a damned being. He believed "there was a connection between the draught and her presence in his house" (p. 2). All the misery was Touba's fault even the absence of rain because she was not a blessed woman.

As a result of the dominant significations on her identity later on we see Touba pictures the sky in her imagination as a man "... the red rays of the sun spread from the east onto the face of the sky, covering it in a glowing halo. A great man was placing a glowing jewelled crown, infinitely large, on his head" (p. 30).

After her divorce and her second marriage to prince Feraydun Mirza, the phallogocentric discourse keeps on its reign on her life. The signifying process continues and just one male signifier replaces another. When the prince, her husband, comes to know that Mr. Khiabani has a spiritual significance for Touba and that she has a devotion to him, he tries to destroy Touba's spiritual world that she had built for herself. He imposes his view on her saying "Mr. Khiabani is a real troublemaker. He repeated the sentence ten times to implant it in Touba's head. Then he said, women should avoid politics because they are too easily ensnared in ruffians' traps, like so many domesticated pigeons" (p. 78). In this society man is defined as the rational being and it is a society in which even wisdom, rationale and knowledge of truth are sexed, as we can see when Touba showed interest in seeking truth in Sufism, her second husband, "prince Feraydun was not happy with these discussions.[...], he did not feel comfortable about a woman learning the secrets of 'The Truth'." In his view "A woman had her own specific duties. If she were to overlook or not fulfill her duties, the world would be utter chaos" (p. 103).

What happens to a woman in a phallogocentric society, when she wants to move against the direction of the stream? Touba decided to choose divorce and leave Feraydun Mirza because of his second marriage to a fourteen year old peasant girl. Prince Gil, who in our opinion is the animus part of Touba, warns her about moving against the direction of the dominant discourse and informs her of its consequences:

"Now I tell you, if you feel you must live with him, go ahead and do it; if not, then leave him. But know that bitter events will follow from that decision. You know you are a woman. The order of things is such that you will be left alone from here on, and this is obligatory. This society cannot tolerate a single woman in search of love; if you wish to do this, they will drag your name through the mud. You will become the infamous one, your children will turn their backs on you, your relatives will pull away from you. You see, it is a life of loneliness".

(p. 170)

POLITICAL DISCOURSE

Women were always the subjects of men's political discourse. Feraydun Mirza accompanying Mohammad Ali Shah, escaped to Russia and returned a few years later with new political views:

He believed that Kaiser Wilhelm was the king of deliverance and that after defeating Russia and England he would come to Persia and save the Iranian people. The prince clung to this dream with abnormal persistence; and gradually, the Prussian emperor became a mythical figure in Touba's mind as well. Rain would come to Iran with Kaiser Wilhelm, prices would fall, Almas Khatun's madness would subside, and welfare and plentitude would return to every home. (pp. 95-96)

When Touba found that Mr. Khiabani, her Holy man, her spiritual master, was against Wilhelm all her dreams collapsed; again the presence of a man controlling her mind is felt. This shows that discourse is capable of remote control of the mind and such was the power of phallogocentric discourse in constructing female subjects. Aside from the effects of political discourse of men on women's lives, woman's mind has always been the target of politics to be changed and transformed in favor of its policy. The political game of men's discourse in women's lives and considering them as the objects of their political objectives and targets reaches its highest point in the case of marriage. Feraydun Mirza's marriage to a fourteen year old peasant girl, the daughter of the headman of one of the villages in his regional authority was of this type. This brought Touba to the point of depression:

"..., taking a second wife for him was more of a spiritual or political move than a reflection of physical desires. He had to prove his princely power to the peasants, and it was part of his position as a prince that he extend a protective umbrella over his subjects. Prince took peasant wives in order to feel connected to the peasants, and the peasants' interests were secured through their representatives who served the princes. In general, then, the princes should be kind to the people". (p. 150)

CONCEPT OF KILLING WOMAN

Prince Gil, Prince Feraydun Mirza's friend, hated women and had many experiences in woman-killing. First he had tried to kill his Sufi Master's beloved, who was a Christian girl, in order to save the Master from his love sickness and madness. He killed peasant girls: "I found peasant girls by the spring, I mixed with them, and after satisfying myself I would discard them like refuse. I killed them" (p. 118). He killed Layla over and over; he killed shepherd Amin's wife, a newly wedded bride, because of her slowness and hindrance. As he says "the woman became a hindrance. She was fat and incompetent. She had no sense of initiative.[...]I had in mind to organize a small group of strong warriors to attack the Mongols. But the woman was always the embodiment of burdensomeness" (p. 119). He killed her to remain free, to protect his freedom: "Didn't I consider the woman an invisible chain on my ankle" (p. 124)? The reality is that he was a man carrying the corpse of woman kind on his shoulders, "... her corpse became heavier every minute" (p. 165). Here the concept of woman killing is a symbolic representation of the killed individuality of woman in phallogocentric societies. In such societies, phallus, the creator of the dominant discourse, considered woman as a burden. As Prince Gil recounts the female corpse he was carrying: "Her feminine nature lacked any sense of progression, it was static.[...] she was a heavy mass that had no intention to cooperate, and it eventually seemed as though she had been on my back since birth and was growing there" (p. 166). Parsipur's pen paints a beautiful drawing of

patriarchal discourse in killing women's individuality, turning them into submissive corpses and then accusing them of being a burden on men's shoulders since birth.

The story Prince Gil tells Touba is the very story of all women, as though Prince Gil is the embodiment of patriarchy and phallogocentrism. In search of a lost woman in his past, after nights and days of searching, he finds her by a stream, killed: "I dug the ground next to the stream and found a suitcase. I took the case to my hut. The cut-up body of the woman was in it. I put the parts together. I went to wash my hands, and when I returned, the woman was sitting behind the door. It was my very Layla" (p. 168). Layla is the manifestation of all women whose souls had been killed and buried in their bodies for a long time during (his)story: "The woman had rotted under the earth for thousands of years. She had the experience of thousands of years of rotting and becoming earth" (p. 168).

ROYAL DISCOURSE AND MARRIAGE

Moones, Touba's younger girl is also a female victim in the novel. Despite her love for Ismael, patriarchal royal discourse pushes her to marry Mr. Khansari a man more than fifty years her senior and a man of honor. Although her father asked her opinion about this marriage "Moones knew that she would have to become his wife" (p. 186). The royal discourse which is ruled by men doesn't allow a woman of royal blood to marry an ordinary man like Ismael. The discourse took her individuality, even in marriage.

CAREER CHOICE

After three years Moones chooses divorce and starts her journey of moving against the flow of discourse. Despite the society's disdain of a working woman, she started to work in a bank. The dominant view of working women is clear in Touba's statement: "what frightful audacity, ... and how dangerous. Her daughter wanted to work, but it was unheard of for a woman to work in an office, next to men. What would people say? They probably would equate the girl with a prostitute" (p. 196). Moones' sister Manzar O-Saltaneh "had warned her many times that it was shameful for any woman to work in an office, let alone the daughter of Prince Feraydun Mirza of the royal family." Moones wanted to be an "independent and self sufficient" woman, she wanted to have "command of her whole being" (p. 201). But the dominant ideology tried to prevent her from achieving this.

RELIGIOUS DISCOURSE

In a phallogocentric society even the spiritual and mystic world is under the control of men. A mystic and spiritual being rules the world without whose spirit the world will stop turning. As Moones told Maryam, the daughter of Mahmood the mason who was raised by her, about Master Geda Ali Shah the Sufi Master:

Every breathe that the Master took was synchronized with the breath of the cosmos. If, God forbid, the Master were to die one day, the wheel of the cosmos would stop turning. For this reason, even if he died, his spirit would still inhabit the world. [...] A mystic breathed with the world, adapting his breath to the world's breathing; no one could do this perfectly except Master Geda Alishah, who was one with the world. Whether he was a youth or an old man, whether he appeared alive or dead, all was in unison with him. (p. 276)

WOMAN AND HER PLACE

Touba gradually changed into an old woman who resisted every new thing. Her house was tumbling down but she resisted any improvements. "Only a few things remained that

grounded her to life. She felt that if she were to change them, she would forget her soul and her identity.[...] the only thing she had was the house” (p. 303). The reason she didn’t want to lose her house was because she needed something to hold on to. For more than sixty years she had been care taker of the house and guardian of the corpses. She questions herself about what happened to her desire to seek God and Truth, to give birth to a Messiah. She had been so busy protecting her house that she didn’t even notice the changes and the reality of the outside world. She was living in the illusion of her house unaware of any changes. “During all the years that she was protecting the house inside, events were occurring outside” (p. 313). The question is who kept Touba in the house for all these years? Who can be accused of bringing about all Touba’s limitations and misery? The phallogocentric binary opposition of outside/inside brought all these restrictions to her. Indeed men believed in and defined that the woman’s place is at home, to remain inside and not pay attention to her own needs and just do housework and take care of her children and husband.

THE COLLAPSE OF PHALLOGOCENTRISM IN TOUBA AND THE MEANING OF NIGHT

Parsipur through her bitter realistic portrayal of Touba’s life puts emphasis on the fact that all her difficulties arise from the reality of being a woman. In the last part of the novel Touba questions every moment of her life. “Seeking answers to the causes of women’s misfortunes, resisting her victimization by all possible means, venturing into orthodox religion, Sufism, nationalism, and other forms of thought only to find them all unfulfilling.” At the end of her search for God and Truth, Touba through her imaginary journey to the far away past with Layla comes to the realization that “women have suffered throughout history mainly because they live in a world that does not belong to them” (p. 12), a world which is ruled by man’s discourse. She becomes aware of the dominance of phallogocentric discourse on women’s lives and destiny. Men define their destiny and in this way women are doubly destined, first by nature and then by men. “She thought she should go out to introduce herself to people. She felt a desperate need to tell them who she was, who her father was, what he had done. People must know that he determined Touba’s destiny and the turns of the wheel of her life” (p. 313). Touba describes her misery, of which men were its cause, in this way:

“what a vain life. She felt useless. She remembered that in all her life she had not once looked carefully at a butterfly, never observed the beautiful wings of a cricket. And worst of all, she had never seen a forest or a desert, and she did not know the amazing contrast between the two. She had circled continuously around a house that one day might not exist”.

(p. 319)

FEMININE DISCOURSE

According to Cixous, woman can be discovered in feminine writing. “Women, she urged, must write their bodies, to unfold the resources of the unconscious” (Habib, 2005, p. 256). The resources that have been repressed and now it’s the time for them to return, to be resurrected. Parsipur is the follower of Cixous’ feminine writing; her feminine language lays stress on every aspect of women’s existence, from body to soul. From the very beginning Parsipur as a female writer puts emphasis on the importance of the female body. Many times she calls our attention to Touba’s body, her beauty and her golden hair. Many times Parsipur speaks about the beauty and femininity of woman. As Cixous states “I write woman: woman must write woman” (Cixous, 1976, p. 877). Parsipur describes Layla as the embodiment of beauty and femininity. Layla is the embodiment of feminine sexuality and passion. Through Layla, Parsipur rewrites the old, silent and passive woman and brings into being a new

woman. A woman who is passionate, active, who laughs openly, who sings and dances, who follows her passion and desire.

Moones, Touba's daughter, is a woman who subverts her female body in her hand, using a sharp instrument on herself to get rid of her child. In order to save her life, the doctors had been forced to perform a hysterectomy. Her female body becomes sterile and her body would no longer experience motherhood. She had been turned into a "shapeless clay". A woman subverts her female body in her hand. What does it imply? The possibilities of motherhood and pregnancy are two things a woman could be proud of; two aspects of female body which have spiritual significance for every woman. In this way Parsipur by emphasizing the female body's reproductive faculty underlines the importance of motherhood which is a gift from God to every woman. Moones' pregnancy is a symbol; through her Parsipur shows how the patriarchy stole the creative mother within her, how he stole the power and individuality of woman and made her sterile.

"The operation of mother and pregnancy symbolizes the body's reproductive faculty and the regenerative force of the mind and through this maternal love, feminine writing originates. Cixous wants woman to reclaim her natural self-expression and look to the creative mother within to write, whether writing assumes form of lived experience, actual child birth, or written expression".

(Joodaki & Vajdi, 2013, p. 76)

Women writers with their texts about women have an important part in bringing women to consciousness and deconstructing phallogocentrism.

"The problem is not that language is insufficient to express women's consciousness but that women have been denied the full resources of language and have been forced into silence, euphemism, or circumlocution.[...] All that we have ought to be expressed – mind and body – a process of incredible difficulty and danger".

(cited in Lodge, p. 318)

Parsipur's depiction of Touba's resistance to dominant male structure and the repressive language of patriarchy was clear from the very beginning of the novel when she distanced herself from the masculine universe by her two divorces; first from Haji Mahmud, and then from Prince Feraydun Mirza.

SYMBOLISM IN DANCE

Every dominant culture predefines being a woman based on some codes of behavior and appearance as mechanisms to control them. In the contexts of the society reflected in the novel, we see the character's resistance to the codes the patriarchal discourse of their traditional society imposed on them. This resistance is seen most obviously in Layla who later transferred her fighting quality to Touba. Layla being a dancer is in fact mocking the system, the codes and norms of patriarchy. Layla is Cixous's Medusa; the real Layla was innocent and looked like a virgin who was the image of purity. Her beauty, dance and laughter is the symbol of mocking the male dominated ideologies. Layla's dance is a reflection of power and protest. "Dance movements can be considered as the actual display of the dancers' desire to show the need to escape and liberation and freedom" (cited in Joodaki & Mahdiany, 2013, p. 72). Layla is in search of a freedom which she "cannot fight for with words". With her "body language", Layla is threatening the dominant ideology. "Colonial administrations often perceived indigenous dance practices as both a political and moral threat to colonial regimes" (ibid.). As a result, Prince Gil, as the representative of the dominant discourse, tries to kill her to prevent her revolution and uprising. On the other hand from a psychological point of view dance is a "site of desire". The female desire which has been repressed by the

male doctrines finds a voice in the movements of her body through dance. Layla's dance is to prove her individuality and identity which originates from the body. By claiming and embracing her feminine body she tries to gain her real status within the dominant phallogocentric discourse. Since women's body, beauty and femininity have been colonized during (his)tory by male colonizers Layla's dance and body motions is not only a site to get pleasure but also a site to protest. Layla who is the embodiment and symbol of movement, dance and revolution finally helps Touba to reach the reality of her being. Farzaneh Milani states that "Iranian women writers gave eloquent voice to my feelings of marginality, of not belonging, of homelessness." She goes on to say that "In this literature, I could see and hear women loud and clear, dancing, laughing, crying, loving. . . . Theirs was the dance of the once immobile, the song of the once mute" (Milani, 1992, p. 14). Through Layla, Parsipur rewrites the old, silent and passive woman and brings into being a new woman. A woman who is passionate and active, who laughs openly, who sings and dances who obeys her passion and desire. Layla was dancing "her hair, arms, and legs all flowing. . . The woman did not seem human. None of her behavior was like that of any other women"(p. 115).

NO INSIDE/OUTSIDE BINARY OPPOSITION

In *Touba and the Meaning of Night* women's lives and world have been limited to home and the outside world is defined as men's domain. Actually it is the dominant discourse of patriarchy which has created these restrictions and has separated male and female spaces. Touba lived more than seventy years in a house and couldn't leave it or change its appearance because the only thing she had was the house and she didn't want to forget her soul and her identity. All of these were assumptions of patriarchy that defined a woman's place in home and these assumptions had been imposed on her mind. But Touba broke from home and entered the outside world. At the end of the novel Touba feels a need within herself to go in search of Truth outside her home, and in this way once more the phallus-centered structures were collapsed by women characters. At the end of the novel we see Touba seeks Truth in the outside world: "Touba took off into the streets. . . . she no longer recognized the city. . . . she recognized no one. She thought she ought to introduce herself to people. She felt a desperate need to tell them who she was... she didn't know anything; she was not responsible for knowing. . . . perhaps she would understand it (the truth) now if she had always walked around the streets,... If she had gone on trips and seen the world. How foolish she had been to hide in the house until events suddenly descended upon her like an avalanche (p. 313). The symbol of the pomegranate, an image that symbolizes the feminine is used by Parsipur to represent the truth of Touba's life. "the woman thought that this was the truth, the pomegranate seeds. She had received a vision that the truth which she did not know and yet had spent a lifetime guarding, was born of Saint Pomegranate..... The tree was old. It was actually hollow. But for the last time it offered the masterpiece of its existence. The woman thought she should take the truth to the streets so that people could taste the truth. There among the people there were some who knew what truth was. The mystery of her guarding the pomegranate tree was revealing itself to her. There in the street, the people would tell her what truth was" (p. 324).

WOMEN'S FRIENDSHIP

The bonding and friendship between women, fills their psychic gap which has been created in the symbolic order by castration. The wholeness which they felt with their mothers in the imaginary phase of their psychic development is interrupted by the law of the father which is language and discourse; and this interruption results in a permanent feeling of lack and loss in their unconscious minds. As it is clear in the novel, women's friendship shatters the

phallogocentric discourse and the oppressive structures of patriarchy. The secure and supportive space in women's friendship appeases the feeling of lack, the need to be united with the imaginary mother is fulfilled and in this way the reconstruction of female identity becomes possible. This bonding and friendship is seen in Touba's friendship with other women like Madam Amineh and Layla. "Obioma Nnaemeka states, women appropriate and refashion oppressive spaces through friendship, sisterhood, and solidarity and in the process reinvent themselves" (cited in Sy, 2008, p. 6).

WOMEN'S SELF AND IDENTITY

Woman's self and identity has been killed over and over during history. Like Layla who has been killed "on a regular basis" by the prince: "...and then the prince would bring her back to life because he could not live a moment without her." Layla said "the problem was that each time she died she was innocent, but when she came back to life she was not innocent" (p. 330). Each time the man brought her back to life she was not her real, pure being; she was what prince wanted her to be. But each time she died she was her real self. Whenever she went back to her real self, the prince killed her. But this time Layla decided to "take the opportunity away from the prince. She would not let him kill her; she would kill herself", as Layla said: "only with my death is purity possible." Only if woman (woman kind) symbolically kills her constructed self she could remain pure and innocent, far from the phallogocentric significations. So women must kill the subjects that the phallogocentric ideologies have created out of them and be born again with a new, untouched identity which is constructed by themselves. Layla: "we have to go together to the depths of eternity. Silence is possible only there. He now knows us not" (p. 331).

FRUIT TREE AS A FORM OF SYMBOLISM

The pomegranate tree, Setareh and Maryam's last home revealed its truth to Touba; it had borne fruit. "The pomegranates had ripened and cracked open, and their shining red seeds shone in the golden-bright sun". In her view "the truth was born of Saint pomegranate" (p. 323). "The pomegranate is a symbol, an image that has symbolized the feminine in classical works such as those of Nezami Ganjavi, the twelfth century Persian poet. In Parsipur's work, it is a tree that stands tall and fruitful on female corpses" (pp. 9-10). "The tree was old. It was actually hollow. But for the last time it offered the masterpiece of its existence. . . the mystery of her guarding the pomegranate tree was revealing itself to her" (p. 324). Pomegranate is a symbol of the unification of women. A new generation of women is born out of the old one, Layla kills herself and is reborn, Touba dies; her death is symbolic. They go together to the "depths of eternity". As Layla says, "Silence is possible only there". "She pulled the old woman to the depths with her. They traveled down to the roots of the pomegranate tree" (p. 331), to the "consciousness" (p. 332). And beneath the pomegranate, where there appeared a ray of light, in the consciousness down in the roots of the old pomegranate they come to consciousness that the old generation must be killed symbolically and a new generation of women must be born. As it is clear in what Layla says: "Our era comes to an end. After seven thousand years of struggle, something else must now begin. I once killed myself, but now what about you? Are you ready to die?" (p. 337). The symbolic death, going to depths of the pomegranate tree and coming to consciousness are the symbolic representations of woman being reborn and becoming free from her constructed self. Pomegranate is a symbol of unification of women because of the color red which identifies the existence of women.

The challenging of the solidarity of logocentrism and phallogocentrism has today become insistent enough – the bringing to light of the fate which has

been imposed upon woman, of her burial – to threaten the stability of the masculine edifice which passed itself off as eternal natural; by bringing forth from the world of femininity reflections, hypotheses which are necessarily ruinous for the bastion which still holds the authority. What would become of logocentrism, of the great philosophical systems, of world order in general if the rock upon which they founded their church were to crumble? [...] When they awaken from among the dead, from among the words, from among the laws”.

(Lodge, 2000, p. 266)

CONCLUSION

Parsipur’s experience of being a woman in a male-centered system is mirrored in her novel. Women writers who write about women have an important part in bringing women to consciousness and deconstructing phallogocentrism. These writers with their female pen and feminine discourse, reflect the experiences of women in male-centered contexts and as social reformers redefine female identity. As the pioneers of change, they question the rightfulness of the dominant assumptions and reshape the false assumptions and ideas of the dominant discourse. In *Touba and the Meaning of Night*, the dominant story is the female tradition and experience, not the male tradition. Parsipur’s female point of view overshadows her novel and the female voice is heard in her novel loudly and clearly. Helene Cixous asserts on the reflection about every aspect of the female experience and a woman’s unheard voice in feminine writing, and also on the expression of mind and body without any obstacle .

What we need, Mary Jacobus has proposed, is a women’s writing that works within male discourse but works ceaselessly to deconstruct it: to write what cannot be written, and according to Shoshana Felman, the challenge facing the woman today is nothing less than to “reinvent” language, ...to speak not only against, but outside of the specular phallogocentric structure, to establish the status of which would no longer be defined by phallacy of masculine meaning.

(Lodge, 2000, p. 316)

The psycho-feminist study of *Touba and the Meaning of Night* by Shahrnush Parsipur within the framework of Lacan’s theory of subject formation and Helene Cixous’ *écriture féminine* show that the power of phallogocentric discourse in constructing female subjects has faded. The dominant system in the novel is patriarchy, but we see women characters who, despite their early oppression, resist the influence of patriarchy on their identities and their lives in different ways and levels. The female character’s bitter experience of the dominant system brought them to consciousness, self perception and struggle. The women writer’s depiction of women’s resistance in oppressive systems, such as in *Touba and the Meaning of Night*, reflects their opposition to the construction of gender in male dominated societies.

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